Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

Message Text

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PAGE 01 LONDON 12330 01 OF 03 231742Z

44
ACTION EUR-25

INFO OCT-01 ISO-00 CIAE-00 DODE-00 PM-07 H-03 INR-11 L-03

NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-03 SS-20

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TO SECSTATE WASHDC 4130
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E.O. 11652: PINT, ELAB, UK
SUBJECT: ON BEYOND BRIGHTON: THE UNIONS AND THE
GOVERNMENT AFTER THE TENTH OF OCTOBER

REF: A. LONDON 11319, B. A-748, C. LONDON 11450

BEGIN SUMMARY: THE TUC SUCCEEDED IN DEMONSTRATING AT
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PAGE 02 LONDON 12330 01 OF 03 231742Z

ITS BRIGHTON CONGRESS (REF A) A SENSE OF UNITY AND

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

RESPONSIVENESS -- SYMBOLIZED IN THE NOW FAMOUS SOCIAL CONTRACT -- WHICH ITS LEADERS HOPED WOULD HELP THE LABOR PARTY DURING THIS ELECTORAL CAMPAIGN. IN TURN, THE LABOR GOVERNMENT THROUGH A SERIES OF DRAMATIC DECISIONS IN THE SOCIAL AND INDUSTRIAL SECTOR AND THE PROMISE TO KEEP MASS UNEMPLOYMENT AWAY FROM BRITAIN'S DOOR, HAS SHOWN EAGERNESS "TO GO THE LAST MILE" FOR ITS TRADE UNION ALLIES. THE KEY QUESTION NOW IS WHETHER THE "SPIRIT OF BRIGHTON" WILL CONTINUE INDEFINITELY, IF THE LABOR GOVERNMENT RETAINS POWER, PARTICULARLY IN THE FACE OF THE GLOOMY PREDICTIONS ABOUT THE BRITISH ECONOMY. ON THE OTHER HAND, IS CONFRONTATION INEVITABLE IF THE CONSERVATIVES OR A CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL COALITION ARE IN PLACE AFTER OCTOBER 10? THIS MESSAGE EXAMINES SOME OF THE FACTORS INVOLVED AND TAKES A SIDE-LONG, IF HESITANT, GLANCE INTO AN EXCEEDINGLY MURKY CRYSTAL BALL. END SUMMARY

1. THE STATE OF THE ECONOMY - THE KEY FACTOR, OF COURSE, IS THE ECONOMY WITHIN WHICH ANY GOVERNMENT, LABOR, CONSERVATIVE OR COALITION MUST FUNCTION IN THE MEDIUM TERM. ALTHOUGH THE POST-OCTOBER 10TH GOVERNMENT MAY TAKE COMFORT IN AUGUST TRADE AND RETAIL PRICE FIGURES WHICH WERE FAVORABLE, THE LONGER TERM OUTLOOK IS INDEED GLOOMY. THE NATIONAL INSTITUTE OF ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL RESEARCH (NIESR) HAS FORECAST A STAGNANT ECONOMY, WITH RISING PRICES AND A FALL IN REAL GROSS DOMESTIC PRODUCT (GDP) IN 1974, ONLY A SMALL INCREASE IN REAL GDP NEXT YEAR, WITH CONSUMER PURCHASING POWER FALLING IN BOTH YEARS (REF B, A-745). IT IS TO BE RECALLED THAT PRIME MINISTER WILSON -- BASKING IN THE GLOW OF GOOD FELLOWSHIP AT BRIGHTON (REF C) -- STILL FOUND IT NECESSARY TO WARN THE TUC THAT IT "CANNOT EXPECT ANY SIGNIFICANT INCREASE IN LIVING STANDARDS OVERALL IN THE NEXT YEAR OR TWO." INDEED, HE SAID, "IT WILL BE A TREMENDOUS CHALLENGE TO OUR STATESMANSHIP TO EVEN MAINTAIN AVERAGE LIVING STANDARDS."

2. THE STATE OF THE UNIONS - THERE ARE CLEARLY SOME POWERFUL FORCES FOR MODERATION WITHIN THE TRADE UNION
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MOVEMENT WHICH REMAIN GENUINELY DETERMINED TO TRANSLATE THE "SPIRIT OF BRIGHTON" AND A HEIGHTENED SENSE OF TRADE UNION RESPONSIBILITY INTO PRACTICAL COLLECTIVE BARGAINING TERMS. THESE FORCES INCLUDE MEN LIKE LEN MURRAY, THE TUC GENERAL SECRETARY, WHO HAS QUIETLY, SOMETIMES BRILLIANTLY, SHEPHERDED THE TUC THROUGH A DIFFICULT YEAR, AND WHO HAS GAINED CONSIDERABLE RESPECT AND CREDITABILITY FROM HIS PEERS. WITH MURRAY, THERE ARE

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OTHER MODERATES WHO WANT THE SOCIAL CONTRACT TO WORK -- SUCH AS MEN LIKE DAVID BASNETT, OF THE MUNICIPAL WORKERS; DAI DAVIES, OF THE STEELWORKERS; ALF ALLEN, OF THE SHOP-WORKERS. BUT THE SINGLE, MOST POWERFUL FIGURE IN THE TRADE UNION MOVEMENT IS JACK JONES, HEAD OF THE LARGEST TUC UNION, THE TRANSPORT AND GENERAL WORKERS UNION. THUS FAR, JONES -- WHILE HELPING TO MOVE THE TUC LEFT-WARD ON FOREIGN POLICY ISSUES -- NOW APPEARS TO BE, IF NOT IN THE MODERATE CAMP, AT LEAST AN ADVOCATE OF RE-STRAINT AND ACCOMMODATION, AND MORE THAN ANY OTHER SINGLE LEADER IS IDENTIFIED WITH THE SOCIAL CONTRACT.

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PAGE 01 LONDON 12330 02 OF 03 231744Z

44
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3. ON THE OTHER HAND, THERE ARE UNIONS - MOST NOTABLY THE AMALGAMATED UNION OF ENGINEERING WORKERS (AUEW), LED BY HUGH SCANLON, WHICH IS CLEARLY OPPOSED TO THE POLICY OF ANY FORM OF WAGE RESTRAINT, AND HAS REPEATEDLY SAID SO. AS KEN GILL, THE COMMUNIST LEADER OF THE AUEW'S WHITE COLLAR WING (TASS) MADE CLEAR AT BRIGHTON (REF C), THERE ARE MANY TRADE UNIONISTS WHO SHARE THE ENGINEERS' LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

VIEWS, EVEN THOUGH THEY MUTE THEM IN ORDER TO DISPLAY SOLIDARITY ON THE EVE OF A GENERAL ELECTION. MOREOVER, SINCE THERE HAS BEEN CONSIDERABLE DEVOLUTION TO LOCAL, OR PLANT BARGAINING IN KEY BRITISH INDUSTRIES, THERE IS CONSIDERABLE DANGER THAT PRESSURES FROM BELOW COULD WELL UPSET THE CALCULATIONS OF UNION LEADERSHIPS PREPARED TO ACCOMMODATE THEMSELVES TO DRASTICALLY CHANHED CIRCUM-STANCES INHERENT IN PRIME MINISTER WILSON'S STRICTURES ABOUT A LOWERED STANDARD OF LIVING. (AN EXAMPLE OF THIS IS A NEW AGREEMENT LAST WEEK INVOLVING HIGHER RATES OF PAY FOR FORD WORKERS AT DAGENHAM AND HALEWOOD WHICH IS BEING CHARACTERIZED BY THE PRESS AS A "DENT" IN THE SOCIAL CONTRACT AND BY SOME CONSERVATIVE SPOKESMEN AS ITS DEATH KNELL. THE NEW AGREEMENT IS BEING MADE DESPITE THE FACT THE OLD ONE HAS RUN FOR ONLY FIVE MONTHS AND THE SOCIAL CONTRACT PRESUPPOSES TWELVE MONTH INTERVALS BETWEEN WAGE RISES. JACK JONES HAS STRENUOUSLY DENIED THAT THE PROJECTED AGREEMENT IS A BREACH, ARGUING THAT THE "SOCIAL CONTRACT IS FLEXIBLE - NOT A WITEHALL DIKTAT.")

4. ANOTHER FACTOR IS THE CONTINUING SHIFT OF THE BRITISH TRADE UNION MOVEMENT ON THE WHOLE TO THE LEFT, WHICH HAS BEEN MOST DRAMATICALLY REFLECTED IN THE ELECTION OF THE FIRST COMMUNIST (KEN GILL) TO THE TUC GENERAL COUNCIL IN MANY YEARS. (GILL IS PERHAPS ONE OF THE MOST ARTICULATE, CHARISMATIC COMMUNISTS ON THE NATIONAL SCENE). HE, TOGETHER WITH CLIVE JENKINS, LEADER OF THE SUPERVISORY, TECHNICAL AND MANAGERIAL WORKERS (ASTMS) AND JIM SLATER, NEW HEAD OF THE NATIONAL UNION OF SEAMEN -- TWO LEFT-WINGERS WHO WERE ELECTED TO THE GENERAL COUNCIL AT THE SAME TIME -- WILL HELP TO BUTTRESS THE TUC LEFT WING OF THE COUNCIL. THEIR ELECTION TO THE TUC'S EXECUTIVE SUITE REFLECTS IN LARGE PART THE FACT THAT, AS OLDER LEADERS IN THE LEADERSHIP RETIRE FROM THE SCENE, THEIR SUCCESSORS IN THE LEADERSHIP WILL BE DRAWN FROM AMONG MORE MILITANT, LESS TRADITIONAL SECOND ECHELON WAITING IN THE WINGS.

Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

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5. IT IS ALSO WELL-KNOWN THAT ALL OF THE EXTREME LEFT-
WING PARTIES IN THE UK -- COMMUNIST, TROTSKYITE, MAOIST,
ET AL -- ARE DILIGENTLY AND OFTEN USCCESSFULLY PLOWING
THE TRADE UNION GROUND, PARTICULARLY AT THE LOWER LEVELS
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OF UNION HIERARCHIES AND ON THE SHOP FLOOR WHICH CONTRI-
BUTE TO THE SECOND ECHELON LEADERSHIP. (FROM THIS VAN-
TAGE POINT THEY NOT ONLY INFLUENCE TRADE UNION POLICY
BUT, IN VIEW OF THE SYMMBIOTIC RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE
TRADE UNIONS AND THE LABOR PARTY, ALSO HELP TO STIMULATE
THE PARTY ITSELF TO MOVE TO THE LEFT). QUITE APART FROM
ITS LONGER TERM AIMS, WHICH WOULD BE MORE CLEARLY DIS-
CERNED IF A SERIOUS DEPRESSION HIT THIS COUNTRY, THE
OBVIOUS SHORT TERM AIM OF THE EXTREME LEFT IS TO UNDER-
MINE THE SOCIAL CONTRACT, AND ITS PILLAR -- WAGE RE-
STRAINT -- FOR WHICH IT HAS EXPRESSED UTTER CONTEMPT.
THESE FORCES, JOINED BY OTHERS WHICH HAVE GENUINE ECONO-
MIC AND TRADE UNION RESERVATIONS ABOUT THE UTILITY OF
THE SOCIAL CONTRACT, WILL MAKE THE TAST FOR LEN MURRAY
AND OTHER MODERATES - AND ULTIMATELY FOR THE GOVERNMENT -
EXCEEDINGLY DIFFICULT.

6. IT IS INDEED ALSO TRUE THAT THEERE IS A GROUP OF
OPTIMISTS WHO SEE A PENDULAR SWING BACK TO MODERATION.
THEY RELISHED THE SIGHT AT THE TUC'S BRIGHTON CONGRESS
WHEN SCANLON'S LEFT-WING AUEW WAS ALMOST TOTALLY ISOLATED
IN THE DEBATE OVER THE SOCIAL CONTRACT (REF A). A
PENDULAR SWING IS OF COURSE ALWAYS POSSIBLE -- THERE
HAVE BEEN SEVERAL PENDULAR SWINGS IN BRITISH TRADE UNION
HISTORY -- BUT THERE IS SCANT EVIDENCE THAT SUCH A
SWING BACK IS IMMINENT.

7. THE UNIONS UNDER LABOR - THE LABOR GOVERNMENT IS
COMMITTED TO A CONTINUOUSLY ENRICHED SOCIAL CONTRACT,
INCLUDING FURTHER BENEFITS TO THE UNIONS, IN THE FORM OF
ADDITIONAL LABOR LEGISLATIVE REFORMS, A BETTER DEAL FOR
PENSIONERS, A FURTHER SHIFTING OF TAXES TO THE RICH,
AND TO OTHER BENEFITS FOR THE ECONOMICALLY DEPRIVED
SECTORS OF THE SOCIETY. ABOVE ALL, LABOR PLEDGES TO KEEP
INFLATION UNDER CONTROL AND UNEMPLOYMENT DOWN, WHILE
ESCHEWING ANY FORM OF CONTROL. THE SOCIAL CONTRACT --
ALTHOUGH IT IS ESSENTIALLY AN ACT OF FAITH -- REMAINS THE
MAJOR, IF NOT THE SOLE MECHANISM, TO ACHIEVE THESE
LATTER OBJECTIVES. IT WULD BE UNFIAR TO DISMISS THE
SOCIAL CONTRACT AS MERELY A TUC/LABOR PARTY ELECTORAL
PLOY AS SOME JOURNALISTS AND OTHER OBSERVERS HAVE DONE.
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IT DOES REPRESENT A SERIOUS EFFORT BY THE TWO MAJOR
PARTIES TO THE CONTRACT TO AVOID THE SCHISM WHICH
DEVELOPED BETWEEN THEM WHEN LABOR EARLIER WAS IN POWER
(1955-1970). THERE IS, AS HAS BEEN NOTED, A SUBSTANTIAL
BODY OF THE TRADE UNION LEADERSHIP, WHICH WANTS TO MAKE
IT WORK.

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44
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Declassified/Released US Department of State EO Systematic Review 30 JUN 2005

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8. BUT IT IS ALSWO THAT THE SOCIAL CONTRACT, AS THE FORD AGREEMENT INDICATES, IS SUBJECT TO MANY DIFFERENT INTERPRETATIONS AND ITS USE AS AN ECONOMIC POLICY TOOL MAY ALREADY BE PUT INTO DOUBT. HOWEVER, IF IT HOLDS SUBSTANTIALLY IN THE SHORT RUN AND EXTERNAL CONSIDERATIONS SUCH AS COMMODITY PRICES (INCLUDING OIL) AND WORLD TRADE GROWTH (E.E., THAT OTHER INDUSTRIAL COUNTRIES DO
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NOT CONTRACT DEMAND EXCESSIVELY) PERMIT THE LABOR GOVERNMENT TO AVOID EXCESSIVE UNEMPLOYMENT AND INFLATION, THEN THE SOCIAL CONTRACT HAS A REASONABLE CHANCE TO BE VIABLE IN THE LONG RUN. IF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT DOES NOT HOLD, THE OUTLOOK FOR THE ECONOMY IS POOR, WITH WAGE PRESSURES EXACERBATING INFLATION AND WITH THE BALANCE OF PAYMENTS DETERIORATING RAPIDLY. A RUN ON STERLING IS POSSIBLE, AND THE LABOR PARTY -- CONGENITALLY OPPOSED TO USING UNEMPLOYEMNT AS AN ECONOMY DEFLATOR -- WILL LIKELY RETURN TO THE WAGE FREEZE WEAPON AND -- DESPITE ITS PLEDGES -- TO SOME FORM OF INCOMES POLICY.

9. THE UNIONS UNDER THE CONSERVATIVES OR A CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL COALITION - IN MOST IMPORTANT RESPECTS, THE TRADE UNIONS VIEW A CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT OR A CONSERVATIVE-LIBERAL GOVERNMENT IN MUCH THE SAME LIGHT, WITH CONSERVATIVE POLICIES DOMINATING IN EITHER CASE. IN TERMS OF THE CENTRAL ISSUE OF DEALING WITH INFLATION, THE UNIONS EXPECT THAT SUCH A GOVERNMENT WOULD WASTE LITTLE TIME BEFORE INSTITUTING A STATUTORY INCOMES POLICY.

10. A NUMBER OF UNION OFFICIALS WITH WHOM WE SPOKE VOW THAT IF THE CONSERVATIVES COME TO POWER, THE SOCIAL CONTRACT "WILL BE A DEAD DUCK." THE UNIONS, THEY SAY, ARE FULLY PREPARED TO WORK WITH THE LABOR PARTY WITH WHICH IT SHARES DEEP FRATERNAL BONDS AND WHICH CLEARLY UNDERSTANDS THE NEEDS OF THE WORKERS, THE POOR, THE DEPRIVED. THE THEY ENVISAGE CONFRONTATION AND RETURN TO THE GRIM BATTLEFIELD DAYS WHICH CHARACTERIZED THE WINTER OF 1973-74. THERE ARE OTHERS, HOWEVER, WHO ARE MORE RESTRAINED IN THEIR JUDGMENT. THEY POINT OUT THAT THE TUC IN EXTREMIS HAS BEEN ABLE TO "LIVE WITH TORY GOVERNMENTS' AND CAN DO SO AGAIN. THESE PRAGMATISTS ADD, HOWEVER, THAT THE CONSERVATIVES WILL HAVE TO PAY A HIGHER PRICE FOR SUCH AN ARMED TRUCE THIS TIME AROUND, IF THEY RETURN TO POWER.

11. COMMENT: NO MATTER WHICH GOVERNMENT, OR GOVERNMENTAL

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COMBINATION IS IN POWER AFTER OCTOBER 10, THERE ARE
CERTAIN FORMS OF ACTION WHICH ANY ADMINISTRATION WILL BE
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PAGE 03 LONDON 12330 03 OF 03 231807Z

FORCED TO TAKE IF THE ECONOMY CONTINUES DOWNHILL. MORE
RIGID CONTROLS -- DESPITE PARTY PLEDGES TO THE CONTRARY--
ARE LIKELY TO BE IMPOSED BY A LABOR GOVERNMENT. WE
BELIEVE THE TUC LEADERSHIP WILL CONTINUE EFFORTS AFTER
OCTOBER 10 TO MAKE THE PRINCIPLES OF THE SOCIAL CONTRACT
WORK -- AND DESPITE THE FACT THAT IT IS AN AMORPHOUS,
MANY NUANCED MULTI-INTERPRETED DOCUMENT, IT IS CONCEIV-
ABLY POSSIBLE THAT THEY MIGHT HOLD IT TOGETHER -- IN THE
MAIN -- AT LEAST FOR A YEAR. AT THE SAME TIME, WE TEND
TO BELIEVE THAT IF THE CONSERVATIVES OR CONSERVATIVE-
LIBERALS COME TO OFFICE, IT NEED NOT SIGNAL A POLITICAL
ARMAGEDDON. WE LEAN TO THE COOLER VIEW OF SOME TUC
LEADERS WHO LOOK TO THE POSSIBILITY OF THE ARMED TRUCE
PERIOD WHICH CHARACTERIZED TUC RELATIONS WITH THE
CONSERVATIVE GOVERNMENT PRIOR TO THE OUTBREAK OF THE
INDUSTRIAL CRISIS. MOREOVER, THE CONSERVATIVES MAY
HAVE ALSO LEARNED FROM THEIR EXPERIENCE AND MAY -- IN
OFFICE -- AVOID THE CONFRONTATIONAL POLICIES SUCH AS
THE INDUSTRIAL RELATIONS ACT WHICH SO PLAGUED THEIR
RELATIONS WITH THE TRADE UNIONS.
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